

The Politics of Help

Building Collaborative Infrastructures in the Human Services

By John Franz

Last year in Lake County, when a social worker named Kathy Princeton became gravely ill, some people at her church got together and formed what they called a “help squad.” Rotating teams brought meals over for Kathy and her family, did some of the household chores, made sure the kids got to their soccer games and dance classes and even set up a weekend holiday for Kathy and her husband when she was well enough to travel. Although it was greatly appreciated, this assistance didn’t surprise the Princetons. They had been on several help squads themselves.

Not long after Kathy came back to work, the new manager of Lake County’s child welfare services, Apollina Smith, gave a half-day workshop on the wraparound approach for her staff. During the meeting, Kathy told the story of how her friends from church had helped out her family and asked, “So, is that wraparound?”

Apollina smiled and said, “You bet it is. The best kind.”

Kathy looked a bit puzzled and asked, “So what’s the big deal? It just comes naturally.”

“That’s great,” Apollina replied. “How many families whose children are in our custody have help squads?”

Kathy thought about that for a moment. She began to suspect that Apollina would not be like her last manager. “You know,” Kathy answered, “I guess it makes a difference when it’s your job to help someone. We don’t want it to, but that can change everything.”

Apollina decided that she was looking at a good candidate for a unit supervisor position that had opened up. “It sure can,” she agreed, “but only if we let it.”

Building the between

Frequently when communities begin to implement the wraparound approach, they emphasize changing the way line staff do their work. Social workers, probation officers, special education teachers and mental health providers are taught the steps of strength-based action planning and how to facilitate or participate on child and family teams. Some alterations may also be made in assignments – for example people who facilitate teams may be given lower caseloads, or staff may be hired who only provide care coordination. The folks with new assignments usually work within a pilot project, while everyone else continues in their pre-existing roles. The plan is to gradually expand the new practice methods to include other units and agencies.

Unfortunately, many communities have found it difficult to move from the pilot stage to broader implementation using this strategy. Charles Glisson and his colleagues at the University of Tennessee have documented the barriers to achieving and sustaining large-scale changes in

practice, even when extensive training, support and guidance are provided to line staff.¹ Glisson's conclusion is that effective change must address the culture and climate of the work environment in addition to helping staff learn and use new skills. This observation has been supported by an extensive amount of research on organizational change in the private sector.² For line staff to adopt a new method of practice, the context in which they work must be aligned with, teach and reinforce the desired approach.

Although changing the organizational culture in a private corporation is difficult, modifying the operating context in human services is even more of a challenge. This is because most of the work is by its nature a multi-agency effort. To produce sustained change, not only must the environment and protocols within each participating public and private agency be addressed, but equally importantly, the relationships between and among these entities must also be improved, as must the interactions between them and the larger community

To move from traditional categorical operations, which divide not only service disciplines but also service organizations, to the integrated model of the wraparound approach requires that we pay as much attention to building a strength-based inter-agency infrastructure as we do to teaching people how to do strength-based planning with families.

This infrastructure has four tiers or components: practice, program, system and community. The practice level captures the changes in methodology that we are hoping to accomplish. The program level addresses the changes in operations that must take place in each agency that houses staff who are expected to do their work in a new way. The system level incorporates the interagency protocols and agreements that provide a template for collaborative support for families. At the community level, the emphasis is on improving the functional connection between the emerging system of care and the community's key stakeholders as represented by business organizations, consumer and advocacy groups, government agencies, faith-based groups, service clubs, etc.

For a large-scale transformation to be successful, a common vision must emerge that both unites and animates all of these elements. We must rally the sustained passion needed to build and sustain the "between" of our human service enterprises.

¹ Glisson, Charles, and Anthony Hemmelgarn. 1998. "The Effects of Organizational Climate and Interorganizational Coordination on the Quality and Outcomes of Children's Service Systems." *Child Abuse and Neglect* 22 (5): 401-21. Martin, Lisa M., Carey L. Peters, and Charles Glisson. 1998 "Factors Affecting Case Management Recommendations for Children Entering State Custody." *Social Service Review* 72 (4): 521-44.

² For example, one study found that municipal employees who were trained in a new practice model (total quality management) but who's work environment did not allow them to practice what they had been trained in had worse customer relations than employees who hadn't been trained at all. The best performance came from employees who had both training and a work context that supported and reinforced their use of the skills from the training. Bennett, Joel B., Wayne E. K. Lehman and Jamie K. Forst. (1999) "Change, transfer climate and customer orientation: A contextual model and analysis of change-driven training. *Group and Organization Management* 25 (2): 188-216.

The redefinition of help

After the workshop, Apollina stopped to thank Kathy for sharing her story. Kathy asked whether Apollina had had any trouble getting the wraparound approach started in Kenyon County when she was the manager there.

“You don’t get out much, do you?” Apollina said.

“Well, I’ve been sick,” Kathy said, and laughed.

Actually, word had spread fast around the agency about how Apollina had been run out of Kenyon for all the trouble she had caused by starting wraparound in that county. But Kathy had been around long enough to know that rumors were more useful for entertainment than information.

“In this case, the rumors are basically true,” Apollina said. “I pushed too hard and too fast, and got burnt. The good news is that wraparound was well enough established that they could only get rid of me, not the model. And the new manager is making it work better than I ever could.”

“So, are you going to do it right this time, here in Lake County?”

“Just different. I don’t think there is any one right way. What I learned from my experience in Kenyon was that having what seems to be a good idea, and having a solid picture in your head of how that idea can be put into operation isn’t enough. You also have to deal with the politics of help.”

“What’s that?”

“There’s a couple of levels to it. First there’s all the maneuvering and competition between and among agencies that everyone knows about, but no one deals with, except to complain. Then there’s the more subtle aspect – the division between the helpers and the helpees in our society. What a client has to go through to get help from most publicly funded agencies is quite different from what your family had to do to get help from your church. To make wraparound work, we not only have to get probation, mental health, the schools and child welfare to stop fighting among themselves, but we also have to help people throughout the system come to recognize that the most effective kind of help is based in reciprocal relationships, rather than one-way interventions.”³

“I think what you’re saying is that it is impossible.”

“Well, maybe a little, but it sure is fun to try.”

³ Edgar Schein provides a useful discussion of strategies for developing balance in the relationship between the help giver and the help receiver in his book *Process Consultation Revisited: Building the Helping Relationship*, 1999, New York: Addison-Wesley.

Why explore the between?

Anyone who has been a part of an organizational change effort of any size knows how challenging these projects can be. Often, attempts at significant transformation even within a single agency run into endless roadblocks – and that’s when everyone agrees that a better way of operating is needed. The resiliency of the organizational status quo has repeatedly amazed those who study the change process.⁴

As hard as it is to get one organization to change, it’s a cakewalk compared to the challenge of redefining relationships and protocols in a multi-agency system of care. Some sort of geometric multiplication of stuckness seems to emerge. Communities often find their intersystem structures operating at the lowest common denominator of their most inflexible component.

So why bother with the between? Because in the case of human service systems, it may be that the invisible network among these institutions – the community’s culture of care – is the greatest contributor to the inertia experienced within any single agency or department. Unless we can overcome its impact, it is unlikely that line staff will be able to make and sustain significant changes in practice.

This is not to suggest that there is a simple linear relationship among changes in the four levels of a community’s system of care. Instead they are constantly interacting with one another and in turn all are being influenced by external factors in the state and the nation.

At any point in time communities attempting to implement wraparound will find themselves at different stages of integration on each of the four levels. Table One illustrates examples of four degrees of growth for each level. The first stage takes place when people, programs, systems or communities work together on an ad hoc basis. At the second stage, a limited amount of structured cooperation occurs. In stage three, a formal system of collaboration is established. The final stage, integration, only emerges when help squads can form as effortlessly for families with complex needs as they did for Kathy and her family.

Around the country, communities that are in the process of establishing integrated systems of care will demonstrate different patterns of implementation. One might be at the collaborative stage in the practice and system levels, while still at the ad hoc or cooperative stage in the program and community levels. Another will have a well-developed community component, but still be at an early developmental stage in other areas. If there is a proper sequence for working through the levels, no one has found it yet.

⁴In a study of two change efforts, one in a city hospital and the other in a large private corporation, that both failed despite good planning and execution, one researcher reached the conclusion that “entire systems can not only be resistant to change, but can translate attempts at fundamental transformation into fuel for perpetuation of the status quo.” To overcome this barrier, he makes the following recommendation: “If researchers and practitioners are to craft more robust interventions into social systems, it behooves them not only to be explicit about their underlying conception of the system but also to acknowledge the conditions and situations under which different action strategies for change can be more or less successful.” Molinsky, Andrew J., (1999) “Sanding down the edges: Paradoxical impediments to organizational change” *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 18-24.

To become more effective at building the between we must improve our ability to recognize the complex nature of this pattern, gain a better sense of where things stand at each point of time within the ongoing turmoil, and learn to take advantage of opportunities for improvement in any of these elements as they occur.

Table One
Degrees of Integration across the Levels of Human Service Operations⁵

	Ad Hoc	Cooperative	Collaborative	Integrative
Practice	Staff from two or three agencies may decide on their own to work together to help a family.	Certain staff in a pilot project are trained to convene and facilitate child and family teams, but must recruit other participants.	A model is developed that allows staff from multiple agencies as well as other informal community partners to work together in certain circumstances.	From the perspective of children and families all needed assistance is available through one contact, regardless of the point of system entry.
Program	Staff in an agency are encouraged to cooperate with colleagues when ever possible.	Two or more agencies include cross-training and shadowing components in their respective in-service programs to improve collaborative work.	Agencies recruit, train and reward staff for their capacity to engage in creative, reciprocal helping efforts with families, other agencies and community stakeholders.	Agencies reshape their internal structure and operations to improve their ability to work in close partnership with one another.
System	The administrators or managers of some agencies and departments begin meeting to improve inter-agency communication.	An interagency agreement is signed, perhaps as part of a grant application, and formal interagency meetings occur.	Formal operational linkages among agencies are established and regularly used to serve children and families.	A unified system for assessment, planning, information management and service delivery is adopted and used.
Community	Stakeholders meet from time to time around specific issues.	Some structured, ongoing community groups are formed.	A formal organization has been created to support collaborative policy development among all human service agencies.	A cohesive, empowered, community-wide decision making entity has been established to guide cross-system operations and resource access.

If it was easy, we'd already be doing it

Three months later, Apollina and four of her managers and supervisors (including the newly promoted Kathy) were sitting around the big oak table in the Lake County Courthouse's ancient, yellow-walled jury room. Joining them were the assistant superintendent for the school district, the deputy chief probation officer, the juvenile court commissioner and the manager of child and family services at the county mental health center.

⁵ Patricia Miles developed the concept of using practice, program, system and community to define the elements of a comprehensive system of care. She uses it both as a tool for teaching about wraparound, and to help communities track their stages of system implementation. Table One was developed with her assistance.

For Apollina, the sense of déjà vu was palpable. The endless Kenyon County stakeholder meetings seemed more like 6 months than 6 years in the past. However, she had decided to take a different approach this time. The jury-room meeting was the culmination of an ongoing series of 1:1 meetings and hallway conversations she had been having with her new colleagues. Mostly she had asked questions and listened. Apollina was too tired to start another round of wraparound evangelization. Instead she had been looking for a point of leverage that fit in with what people were already doing, or hoping to do with their programs.

She found that her colleagues were certainly crusty, scarred and gun-shy after years of interagency warfare. Nonetheless, each in his or her own way was sheltering secret dreams for something better. They definitely didn't like wraparound, whatever it was. (As the school superintendent said, "who wants to go to all those damn meetings.") Still, Apollina heard phrases like, "we gotta build on their strengths" and "we need everyone to be on the same page" and "if what we have doesn't work, we need to get something else."

Apollina built on those comments when she convened the meeting. "I thought it would make sense for us to get together so we could make sure we're all on the same page with our projects." Then she had Kathy tell the story of her church's help squads and present the idea of forming a small unit in child welfare that would use the help squad approach to assist families who were "coming apart at the seams." (The court commissioner's phrase.)

"I thought we should talk our idea through with you because it seems like we could end up having some families or kids in common," Apollina told the group.

She went on to describe how the new unit would operate as seen from the perspective of staff in each of her colleagues' shops. As the other participants made suggestions, she adjusted the organizational diagram she had sketched out on the jury room white board. When there were no more comments, she closed by simply saying, "Thanks, that was helpful. Now be sure to let one of us know if you have any other suggestions after we get this up and running."

Within two weeks everyone who had been at the meeting had called to ask if maybe they shouldn't get together one more time. To each she said, "That's a great idea. Would you like to set it up?"

Eventually, it was the court commissioner who blinked. And thus began the famous non-meetings of the Lake County Jury-Riggers.

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